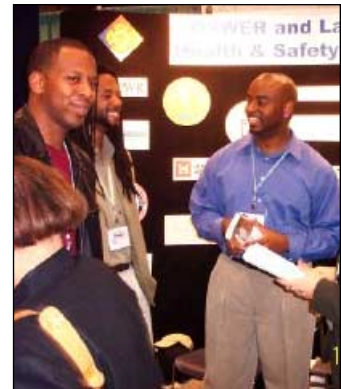


From Justice to Safety to Diversity and Worker Training: NIEHS Participates in Six Sessions of Special Interest at the Brownfields 2003 Conference

From October 27-29, 2003, Portland, Oregon hosted Brownfields 2003: Growing a Greener America. Over 4,100 people from diverse backgrounds participated, making it the largest national brownfields conference to date.

During the conference, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), in partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), was proud to participate in six sessions related to the Brownfields Minority Worker Training Program (BMWTP). NIEHS also shared an information booth with the EPA OSWER and Labor Health and Safety Task Force, which provided awardees the opportunity to share success stories and lessons learned with their colleagues.



The NIEHS began the conference with their Brownfields Program meeting on Monday morning. The moderator of the meeting, Sharon Beard from NIEHS, set the theme for awardees: “The NIEHS, by providing resources to organizations to conduct job skills training for unemployed or disadvantaged brownfields residents, continues to produce highly skilled workers who give back to their communities by increasing the tax base, cleaning up contaminated sites, and re-building the communities where they live.” Awardees shared valuable experiences and lessons learned with the BMWTP. For example, the National Puerto Rican Forum (NPRF) discussed using grant money to extend training programs to a municipal correction facility while Xavier University discussed surmounting challenges by matching requirements with job skills and by integrating flexibility and evaluation into curricula.

The morning session concluded with a special address for the awardees from Linda Garczynski, director of the EPA Brownfields office. After thanking everyone for their efforts at making the varied job training programs the successes they have become, she then acknowledged the frustrations the awardees must feel due to the barriers created by limited federal funds. She mentioned that while other programs faced budget cuts, funds for this program through NIEHS were fortunately expected to remain around their current levels.

Tuesday’s sessions offered the opportunity to discuss a wide range of Brownfields community topics. Confronted by a full room of enthusiastic participants, the two morning session leaders,

Michael Senew from the Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute and Shelia Pressley from the NPRF/Office of Applied Innovation, threw away their prepared script and instead guided the participants through a spirited discussion of training, funding, and job development opportunities in Brownfields communities. Participants frankly discussed ways to redirect federal money from large contractors not associated with local communities to smaller contractors that would rotate the money back into the communities. Also, participants recommended that representatives from the General Service Administration, the Department of Defense, the EPA, and state governments attend the annual meeting to discuss the development of contracts, first source language, and project labor agreements.

At the beginning of the “Reconcilable Differences: Building Sustainable Communities by Engaging Diversity” session, facilitator Michael Lythcott stated: “With an ever-shrinking world and an ever-diverse American work force, we are killing our productivity and destroying the quality of life in our workplaces by not more fully embracing diversity and developing the cultural competencies needed to do so.” To foster an atmosphere that allowed for the appreciation of one another’s cultures, attendees were asked to briefly describe the background of their first name. After that activity, attendees were divided into groups that were assigned unique, real-life case studies covering a broad range of conflicts experienced in professional settings. The issues included those related to transportation, loaning money for licensing fees, and other situations typical for new entrants into the workforce that had recently graduated from worker education training programs. The groups were tasked with identifying which issues were work-related and/or culturally driven, with the ultimate goal of discussing how training programs could be developed in the future to avoid similar conflicts.

Tuesday’s final session, “Linking Environmental Justice Communities with Job Training Opportunities,” welcomed a full room of attendees who were eager to share their thoughts and concerns on Brownfields redevelopment and job placement. Lenny Siegel from the Center for Public Environmental Oversight moderated the session. Participants described their frustra-



tions of being locked out of Brownfields redevelopment projects as local hiring requirements were overlooked because large contracting companies finalized contracts, often with out-of-state employees, months prior. While there are many examples of people working through these barriers and such techniques were discussed, it did indicate a structural problem that the EPA and other funding institutions such as NIEHS should investigate.

NIEHS participation at the Conference concluded with two well-received sessions on Wednesday. In the morning, Timothy Fields from Tetra Tech EM Inc. moderated the “Achieving Success: How the Job Training Program Works” session. It offered perspectives from developers, contractors, local governments, communities, and labor-based apprenticeship organizations as to why and how job training has become crucial to Brownfields projects and to the diversity

of training provided. Kiameesha Evans from the NJ/NY Consortium discussed how the job training programs affiliated with her institution have two primary goals: preparing participants for careers in environmental remediation and construction and developing knowledgeable community advocates and stewards. Through twenty weeks of classes focusing on life skills and health and safety training, participants of such job training programs had a seventy-five percent (75%) success rate from 2001-2003.

Gary DellaVecchia, from the Engineering Remediation Resource Group, discussed the value added of hiring employees with “strong work ethics, positive attitudes, accountability, and the willingness to learn and to be part of a team” that is shaped and encouraged through job training programs. He then told of his involvement in the advisory board at Opportunities Industrialization Center West and how he has committed to hiring locally because of the mutual benefit both contractors and graduates of job training programs can provide to one another – benefits such as lower costs, community involvement, better working environments, and personal growth.

Finally, the brave attendees that showed up for Wednesday’s session in the final time slot witnessed the first time that worker safety was addressed at a Brownfields conference. Moderated by Rod Turpin from the EPA’s Environmental Response Team, “Staying Safe: How To Do It While Cleaning Up Brownfields” provided a helpful overview of the health and safety requirements at Brownfields cleanup sites. Sven Rundman of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reminded listeners: “The purpose of their work and OSHA’s standards is to protect employee health and safety. Do that well, and you all have done your job.”



Overall, the NIEHS demonstrated a strong, enthusiastic presence during Brownfields 2003 by providing a valuable outlet for information exchange, networking, and education. NIEHS also thanks all those who attended its sessions as it looks forward to continuing its outreach during next year’s conference in St. Louis, MO.